

General Advice for Prospective Students

Below is some advice about the general application process from students who are currently studying at St Hugh's, we hope you find it helpful! Check out the Oxford Uni application page for more helpful information.

Open day tips:

'Visit the colleges on open days! Visiting the departments was nice but so much of Oxford is about college life, so it's definitely worth visiting a couple of colleges. If you're short on time try to go for a well-known/central one as well as a further out one or a smaller one, to see the difference. Don't be scared to go to more than one open day if you didn't get to see everything you wanted. If you miss an open day you can go pretty much any time if you call/email the college in advance.'

'I would highly recommend coming to an open day with a prepared short list of colleges you are interested in. I used the College A-Z list on the Oxford website, which has a useful summary of each college, a list of the courses available and a link to the college website for more detail. If you spend the whole day in Oxford you'll probably only have time to view 4 or 5 properly, and there are over 30 to choose from!'

'If you can't come to an open day, don't worry. There are plenty of online resources that can give you a good impression of what college life is like. The OxVlog YouTube channel includes college tours and is also helpful for any other questions you may have. There are also Virtual Open Days due to current lockdown restrictions.'

Don't worry about whether you will fit in...

'I wish I had known that there would be so many other comprehensive school kids like myself (it would have definitely made me less scared to apply).'

'Whilst I was going through the application process for Oxford, I felt quite nervous about "fitting in". I was worried that, because I spoke with a broad Yorkshire accent, had attended my local comprehensive school, and was not particularly well-off, I would stick-out as different. I believed, before coming to Oxford, that I would be looked down upon for my humble background. Within two days of starting at the university, however, my beliefs and worries were all disproved.

It's no lie that some people who attend Oxford University could be described as coming from financially comfortable backgrounds, some have been to private schools, and some maybe, can be described as "posh", but in no way did these factors affect my happiness once I started at the university, because everyone, even people who fit these categories, were really lovely and accepting. There were plenty of people who did relate to my social demography, so I did not stand out as different.

If anyone reading this relates to how I felt before starting the university, then please let me try and reassure you by saying that you have nothing to worry about! Whatever stage of the application process you are in, go for it! Oxford contains many wonderful people who have open arms to accept anyone and everyone who comes to study here.'

'I wish I had an accurate idea about what Oxford life is like away from the work. Oxford is an academically rigorous environment, but it is also an incredibly fun and exciting one. Deadlines exist but so do lots of opportunities to take part in extra-curriculars, socials and whatever else you're

interested in. It's important to not be deterred by the Oxford stereotype; whether that refers to the type of people that go here or the type of university lifestyle you will have.'

Things to consider when deciding on a college:

'All colleges are different but equally amazing. Think about the size of the college; would you prefer a large cohort or are you best suited to a small year group?'

'Some things to look out for include: The Library, the grounds, the proximity to your libraries and lecture halls.'

'I wouldn't worry about location, you can get around Oxford super quickly by bike, or even if you don't cycle you're never more than a 15-30 minute walk from where you need to be.'

'Another thing that you might want to consider is what tutors your college has. On most college's websites you can see their research and while it doesn't matter that much, it's nice to have a tutor who shares your interest.'

'Another thing to consider is the accommodation situation in college. Some colleges will offer accommodation for your whole degree while in others you might need to arrange housing by yourself from the second year onward. Depending on your situation you might prefer either of the arrangements.'

'Look at what colleges have pets! At St Hugh's we have two cats – Biscuit and Flapjack who have actually had a massive welfare impact.'

'Look for things you are interested in: If you like gardens and a bit of freedom, go for one where you can walk on the grass. If you want a formal, *Inspector Morse/Lewis* experience (without the murder) go for an older college in the city centre. If you care a lot about staying on site for three years, look for that. No college is perfect, but no college is particularly bad either. Remember that a lot of your study will be outside of college, so it isn't the only factor.'

'Consider the sort of atmosphere you would like when thinking about the size of the college (St Benet's Hall has a small undergraduate intake and St Hugh's is a lot bigger for example), distance from city centre (although it doesn't really matter since bikes exist), accommodation availability across the years of your course, whether you think it's pretty, green spaces and being able to walk on the grass might all be things to consider.'

Your choice of college doesn't really matter so don't stress about it...

'Choose the college that you can imagine yourself living in and that you really want to go to. Your college choice won't impact your chance of getting in so don't try to tactically choose one which has fewer applicants. This is because you can get "pooled" from another college, meaning if you apply to a certain college but they were very popular then you can get interviewed at a different college.'

'Choosing a college is not as important as you might think. Firstly, it doesn't affect your chances at getting into Oxford, as you may have an interview at a second college and then end up at a different one anyway – tutors try to make the application process so that you are not disadvantaged by your college choice.'

'I wouldn't worry too much about reputation colleges have, you can find lovely people in all of them and each year group is different.'

'A lot of people get pooled for a number of reasons, at any stage of your application. It could mean anything so don't worry. But this also means your choice of college isn't too big a thing. Don't panic over it.'

'Choose a college based on where you can see yourself fitting in socially first and foremost, as the academic side of things will take care of itself wherever you are.'

'It doesn't really matter what college you go to as it will end up being much more about the people you are with than where you are, and you can't control who else applies to each college.'

'If you really don't know, just google them. Make sure to look up which colleges do your course so you don't apply to one which doesn't! An open application means you have no preference of college so they assign you to one at random. This doesn't make you more likely to get in, so if you have a preference then put it. Lots of people do an open application (including me) and everyone ends up loving their college anyway.'

Personal Statement Tips:

'Make sure your personal statement is focused on why you LOVE the subject, (without making it cheesy – put a reason and then back it up with an example).'

'Focus on the area that you are most excited about and tell the tutors how your interest started. Maybe a topic piqued your interest during a lesson and then you decided to read more about it? Maybe you watched a TED Talk about it and wanted to know more? What tutors are looking for are people with curiosity who learn beyond the topics covered in school. That's why you also need to 'prove' your interest in a way. Talk about books you read on the topic, or online classes you took in order to learn more.'

'Everyone finds the personal statement difficult. It's not a reflection on you if you do as well. If you do, look for examples online or read books, but don't copy them exactly. Everyone sees the same examples, so it doesn't matter if yours isn't the same or as polished as it. Chances are it's an extremely high-quality example.'

'It's really useful to have actual examples of why you like the subject. Work experience is good, as is an extended project qualification (EPQ). This is an official qualification that some schools make compulsory but, in my school, only a few people did it. Ask your teachers about it, it's one of the best things I did and I found it really fun. I talked about it in my interview and I honestly think it's how my "passion" for the subject got across to the interviewers. If you can't get on this official qualification scheme, this shouldn't stop you from doing a bit of research on a topic which you can talk about on your personal statement – maybe you can prepare a PowerPoint presentation to present to your family or to a teacher or to younger students, or write a short essay about it to send to your teacher.'

Interview Tips:

'Don't look up news articles of examples of difficult Oxford interview questions which will scare you – the ones you see will be real interview questions, but they will have had more build-up and context in

the real interview. Instead, look at the interview advice on the Oxford website. YouTube also has videos of example interviews.'

'Before the interview, have a read of example interview questions and come up with answers. The internet has a lot and they do help. They give you practise at how to think through the questions and stop the process from seeming entirely strange and unnatural. Plus, if you like your subject, they might be interesting problems anyway. They won't come up if they are easily available online, but practise is important. *So You Want to Go to Oxbridge?: Tell Me About a Banana* is the book I used, it was very helpful. It had mock questions and sample ways to approach them. Your local library or school might already have some books or might order in some for you.'

'When you are in Oxford for interviews, make sure you talk to lots of other applicants, visit the town centre and museums to make the most of the interview process. I would advise not to speak about your subject to other candidates to avoid scaring yourself because of course other people will know things that you don't, just like you will know things that they won't!'

'In my experience, the other candidates were all very friendly and it was easy to talk to people because everyone is in the same position where they don't know anybody. Enjoy your time with the new people you meet at interviews.'

'Every college has a slightly different interview process. The two colleges I was interviewed at based my interview largely on my personal statement (but this won't be the case for every subject or college). When you arrive in Oxford come equipped with your personal statement, any notes, books you mentioned etc. It's good to brush up on these for the interview, to make sure you know what you're talking about and anticipate what you could be asked.'

They're not testing your knowledge...

'Don't try to learn all of the A level/IB course before your interview, because this is impossible and also Oxford interviewers are much more interested in how your thinking works than what you know already, so they will always end up asking you something you won't know the answer to.'

'Be sure to say out loud what you're thinking, even if you're not sure if it's correct. If you are not sure where to start, don't just say "I don't know" instead list things that you can already tell about the question and just literally say what thoughts come into your head about it. They might ask you a bit about yourself and your personal statement, so if you mention something on your personal statement be sure to know what it is. Try and get across your passion for the subject.'

'Tutors will give you time to think and you can always change your mind mid-sentence and correct yourself. The interviews are not about giving correct answers, they are about showing them your thinking process. Some of the questions they ask don't have specific answers or there are many correct ones. So don't be too scared if they ask you something and you don't know. Instead, start thinking out loud. Instead of saying simply: 'I don't know' and being silent say: 'I'm not sure but..' and start making hypothesis based on what you're given. Maybe along the way you'll figure out the answer and even if not you'll get half way there which is also good.'

'Don't worry if a question is unexpected, or if you stumble over it. Just focus on how you can answer, and don't be afraid to openly show your thought processes as to how you got to your answer. A large part of the interview is attempting to see how far you can push ideas and reshape what's been said to create something new, not just giving a pre-written essay. The interviewers are looking to see how

you react to difficult questions not because they want to catch you out or seem cleverer than you, but because they are modelling how the course works.'

'The interview process was my favourite part of my application. Though it may feel like the most stressful part, it's also the best chance to understand the tutorial system. The interviewers will ask you challenging questions, but with humanities there's often no right answer, they are seeing how you think and communicate. Don't be afraid to challenge them, if you don't agree explain why, but also listen to the tutor's argument and respond accordingly.'

'Make sure to take on the advice and hints that they give you – they will make the task easier!'

Most important thing is not to worry too much about them...

'Don't stress. The overall interview process is enjoyable – they last a couple of days and you stay at your oxford college overnight. This gives you a taste of what it's like to study at Oxford.'

'Don't worry if you're shy, an introvert or not great at expressing yourself! The key to getting in is not necessarily to be loud and chatty and smiley (although if you are, it's fine). Just be yourself and answer as best you can.'

'After the interviews don't beat yourself up if you feel you didn't do well – I think I didn't answer any of the questions 100% correct and yet here I am.'

'If you are an international student and are afraid about speaking in your second language for that long, don't worry too much, tutors are very accommodating for that and if you forget a word they will help you out!'

'The questions aren't something you can really practice as they are so unique – don't try and have a pre-worked formula for answering questions, the more open-minded you are the better. Also, don't worry if you haven't had interview practice like a lot of people will have – my school didn't provide it and I actually found it meant I went in with a clearer head and I answered questions the way I wanted to.'

'It's important to breathe and keep calm. It's easier if asked an unexpected or difficult question to slowly speak it through instead of rushing something and giving an answer you don't agree with or thinks makes sense.'

'Outside of the interview, remain calm. Everyone is in the same boat, even those who don't act like it. Everyone is nervous, the vast majority don't know the college they are at, and they are all searching for some time to get used to it.'

'Don't let one interview impact the other or try and read into it afterwards. When I left Oxford, I was certain I hadn't got in, because in my opinion the first interview had gone so badly, turns out it really hadn't! Don't worry about other applicants and how they say their interviews went, each one is different and it's never a good idea to compare.'

'You might get pooled or interviewed at another college, or you might not. They pool people for any number of reasons, from seeing if there's a place elsewhere, to creating a standard by seeing if other interviewers agree with the college's assessments of candidates. This means that people who have passed, people who have not and people who might have are all pooled. In other words, this means anyone might be pulled for any reason, so don't get caught up on why.'

'This is very stressful for most people but try to enjoy it as much as you can – it's really just a chat with a few longer questions chucked in, and once it's over just put it behind you and take pride in having been able to do it! It's fine to feel worried – everyone does, even if they don't look it!'

'Don't worry too much about what you wear or your appearance etc – wear whatever you feel comfortable in, get a good night's sleep and have some food, and try to take deep breaths to relax beforehand.'

'If you get in well done. If you don't, don't worry. It was how you did in one week. It's not an indication of your entire character. It is normal to be upset. But don't grow bitter or despondent on it. You are more than one week of your life, and to even get to interview, or even apply, shows tremendous courage and dedication.'

'If you don't get an offer, it's not the end of the world as Oxford is just a normal university after all. If you do have your heart set on studying in Oxford, consider taking a gap year and re-applying as many people get in 2nd time round. But in the application process, keep reminding yourself that people do get into Oxford, it's not impossible, and that could be you. Good luck!'